



The Philology of the Sign-Language

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Those of you who are Seniors and Juniors, and have studied Philology, know what it means. For those of you who have not yet taken up this subject I will explain that "philology" means literally "love of words" or, because of the fact that we study what we love, philology has come to mean the "scientific *study* of words or language"—how words came into being, from what languages they are descended, how they have been adopted into other languages, and how their meanings have gradually changed.

The Sign-language is as much a real language as any other. It is one of the oldest living languages, as is proved in the hieroglyphics, or picture writing, of Egypt, and the famous "dumb shows" or pantomimes of the old Greek and Roman days, or again in the gestures of the North American Indians. The conventional sign-language, as used in this country today, was brought here by Dr. Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, on his return from France, in 1816, and by his companion, Laurent Clerc, the gifted French deaf-mute. It was modified to suit American conditions, and has expanded naturally, in the course of time, as any living language does. Underneath all these gestures are certain underlying principles, and it seems to me that the time has come when those of us who love this language of signs ought to pause and study it, so that we may appreciate its beauties to their fullest extent.

If a child happens to be born in England or America, or any other English-speaking place, is that any reason why he should be allowed to grow up, just "picking up" the language wherever he happens to hear it, and not be taught its correct usages, or be led to an appreciation of its possibilities and beauties? Well-educated children of any nationality are carefully trained in their own language. We would think it absurd to allow them to use it with never a correction, or never a suggestion as to what was proper or beautiful. And yet that is virtually what we are doing today with the sign-language! Just because a child happens to be deaf, does not make him a good or correct sign-maker any more than, because a child happens to be able to hear, he should speak correctly and in a well-modulated voice, or, what is more, sing in public! And so, if we want our deaf friends to be able to express their thoughts correctly and accurately in the sign-language, even in ordinary conversations, but especially in public meetings, we must train them in the knowledge of the derivations and meanings of the signs.

It is not the province of a paper like this to go into the old discussion as to which is the better method of teaching the deaf

—the manual or the oral. There has been too much bitterness already expended on this subject, and all to no avail, for neither side can ever convince the other. The fact remains, however, that signs *are* used by the deaf, and if not permitted openly in school, they shoot up in the dark like “weeds,” as a noted educator of the deaf called them recently, and the result is a curious and grotesque combination of furtive gestures and expressive faces which no one but the children themselves can understand. I might compare it to the old “Hog Latin” that I learned from my little playmates in school—the chief attraction of which was the thought that the teacher could not possibly understand what we were saying! But when, in after years, I was carefully guided to real Latin, and learned to appreciate its beauties and uses, I was very thankful indeed that I had not been left with my embryo knowledge of the Classics! The child’s play-language *was* a “weed,” of no practical use or beauty, but the wise teacher transformed it into a plant of helpfulness and joy.

To illustrate what I mean by the philology of the sign-language, let us examine a few concrete examples, beginning, perhaps, with family relations. The general sign for “man” or “male” is made by grasping with the right hand the brim of an imaginary hat. In the same way, “woman” or “female” is suggested by drawing the tip of the thumb down along the side of the cheek, where a woman’s bonnet-string would naturally come. “Baby” is pictured by folding the arms and rocking them, one hand representing the baby’s head. With these three signs as a beginning, we can easily represent a “father” as a *man* who holds a baby, and a “mother” as a *woman* who holds a baby—in the old times, babies were held in the arms more than in these days of sanitary and hygienic nurseries! How much more beautiful and expressive these two signs are, when properly made, than when abbreviated into the meaningless waving of fingers from the temple or from the chin. The two sets of gestures bear about the same relation to one another, as the sacred words “Father” and “Mother” to the flippant schoolboy’s “Dad” and “Mom” or “Pa” and “Ma.” In similar fashion the sign for “grandfather” and “grandmother” are made by tossing two generations of babies, and “ancestors,” an indefinite number, always going backward to indicate previous time. A “son” is literally a “male baby,” and a “daughter” a “female baby,” no matter to what age they may attain. A “brother” is a “man,” followed by the sign for “same” or “alike,” made by the two

forefingers outstretched side by side. "Sister" is made in the same way, simply substituting the sign for "female" instead of that for "male." "Children" in general are "men" and "women" in varying heights, indicated by the outstretched hand. A "gentleman" is a man who, in the days when conventional signs were originated, wore a ruffle down his shirt front. The "lady" was "frilly" then, as now.

Domestic animals are pictured by imitating their most prominent characteristics, such as the whiskers of the cat and its soft silky fur that invites petting; the narrow erect ears of the horse; the wide flapping ears of the mule; the bill of the chicken as it scratches the ground—to differentiate it from the bird that is flying; the horns of the cow, followed by the action of milking. "Dog," on the other hand, is suggested not by characteristics of the animal, but of ourselves—the motion which we instinctively make when calling our dog, such as snapping our fingers and patting our knees. Many of these signs may be compared to compound words, and are frequently abbreviated by giving only the first part; but this should not be encouraged as, like abbreviations in spoken or written language, it detracts from clearness and exactness.

Time, in all its divisions of day, night, week, month, season, year, may be very vividly portrayed in the sign-language, but it is "time" in the abstract sense that I am speaking of now, not "time" as measured off by the mechanical ticking of watch or clock. And right here let me make the distinction between these two signs for "time." If we wish to ask "What time is it?" we would indicate the ticking of the timepiece by tapping the forefinger of the right hand on the back of the closed or rounded left hand, followed by the sign for "how many," made by suddenly opening all the fingers from the two closed hands, palms up, as if to let you count them. But, "Did you have a good time?" is the abstract idea, and cannot be measured in seconds and minutes, and must therefore be indicated by the manual letter "t" traveling indefinitely about the face of a clock, suggested by the open palm of the left hand. This is a distinction that is not often adhered to, I regret to say, and yet it is these little distinctions that make the niceties and accuracy of the sign-language just as of spoken language. But to go back to the signs for the divisions of time—the origin of them is very interesting, as they are based on the relative positions of the sun and the earth, the right hand representing the sun in its course through the sky, while the left hand represents the horizon.

Thus, the entire day is indicated by outlining with the forefinger the arch that the sun travels. In "morning" the sun is rising; at "noon" the sun is directly overhead; in the "afternoon" the sun is sinking; at "evening" the sun has just gone over the horizon, while "night" is the time when the sun is entirely below the horizon. The sign for "week" came from the idea of seven fingers, to represent the seven days, slipping forward together to make one unit. It is surprising to find the number of persons who do not know why the sign for week is so made, and who in consequence make the sign incorrectly. A "month" is a longer division of time, measured on the twelfth finger, while a "season" is literally "months three," followed by the appropriate adjective of "growing," "hot," "falling leaves," or "cold." A "year" is one clenched fist revolving about the other to represent the earth's yearly revolution around the sun. The "future" is always in front of us, while the "past" is always behind, so that time phrases like "next week" or "next month," "last year," etc., are easily made by adding the desired sign for future or past.

Perhaps this is as good a place as any to speak of the idiomatic order of the sign-language. The tendency now is like that of spoken language, to simplify it as much as possible, and for the sake of the "English" of our pupils to make it as much like English as possible. There are certain idiomatic constructions, however, that tend toward vigor and emphasis. One of these is the same as the French order—because, as has been said, our sign-language came from France—namely, to put most adjectives after the noun. This makes for clearness and vividness when, as frequently happens, the modifiers are a series of descriptions pictured in the air. We want, first of all, to know what the speaker is talking about. Is it a man, or a mountain, or a mouse? Once we know that, we can follow the descriptions much better than if we must wait until we reach the end of the phrase before we grasp the subject.

The senses are generally indicated in the sign-language by pointing to their respective organs, as to "hear," to "see," to "feel," physically by touching the back of the left hand with the tip of the middle finger of the right hand, emotionally, by touching the heart; to "taste" and to "smell." "Deafness is the ear that is "closed," while "blindness" is the eye from which the light is shut out.

The signs for mental ideas are very suggestive, for without exception they are made by touching the forehead, to indicate

the mind. "To think" seriously of something is to revolve the matter in our minds. This can be easily pictured by the forefinger revolving over the forehead. "To know" is to pat the forehead with the tips of all the fingers of one hand, as if to signify that something of value is stored away there. We "remember" a thing if we first "know" it and then press it in, or seal it into the mind with the same gesture that our ancestors sealed their letters with little red wafers on the end of their thumb. When we "forget" something it is wiped off our mind as a sponge wipes off the writing on a slate. "Wisdom" is measured by the depth of the mind, while "folly" is its shallowness, and "smartness" or "clearness" appears to scintillate from the mind in an upward and outward motion. "To dream," "to imagine," to follow an "ideal," "to persevere," "to hope," "to despair," all depend upon the mind, and all, except the last, have an upward tendency.

In a similar way, as the heart is supposed to be the seat of the emotions, the passions are portrayed by touching the heart with varying gestures of affection or abhorrence, grief, anger, and so on. The passions may also be acted out, and here the person with the dramatic instinct excels. I am looking forward to the time when our moving picture "stars" may have among their numbers some of our own deaf boys and girls.

After all, what is the sign-language but a comprehensive and effective combination of pantomime, facial expression, and gesture? Just as an artistic piece of sculpture may depict an emotion or even a story, without words or without action, so the beautiful sign-language seems to become a series of animated statues, and may convey to the eye what the modulations of the voice carry to the ear. A good sign-maker, then, may become a power among his fellow-men. The deaf man or woman who can express his thoughts in only halting signs is greatly handicapped in his association with others—but let him learn the exact meaning of every sign in the most forceful and clear manner, and he can sway his audience as a speaking orator can. We cannot all make graceful signs, but we can all make correct and clear signs, if we take pains to do so.

Badly made signs are confusing even to persons thoroughly conversant with the sign-language, just as poor enunciation and slip-shod methods of speaking are difficult to understand. To be clear and effective, four general principles of sign-making should be remembered:

1. The signs should be slow—not funereal, of course, but dignified, so that the eye may follow every motion.

2. The signs should be expansive—made from the shoulder, not from the elbow or wrist, just as a good walker swings from the hip, not merely from the knee or the ankle. Try a comparison of signs made from the elbow and those made from the shoulder, and you will quickly appreciate the beauty and force of the latter.

3. The *idea* found in a word or phrase should be translated, but not the literal meaning word for word. For instance, the sign for “meaning” or “intention” should be quite different from the sign for the “meaning” of a word. A “thin” person and a “thin” dress are not the same. There are three different signs for the little word “but,” according as it is used as a conjunction, a preposition, or an adverb. “I am sick” and “I am sick of him” are not signed alike. The sign for being “satisfied” at the table, in the sense of having had sufficient to eat, is frequently misused for the proper sign of being “satisfied” with a person or his behavior.

4. Every sign should be clear-cut. Do not be careless. If a gesture should be upward, do not make it straight out in front of you, or downward. Do not abbreviate. And, above all, I would say to you College students, *do not use slang signs* just because they are amusing. Slang signs may corrupt good signs, just as spoken slang corrupts good English. As College graduates and students you will be looked up to as leaders in your own communities and you will frequently be called upon to express your ideas. If you cannot make yourself understood, if the only signs you know are slang, invented by a very small group of students and absolutely unintelligible to the deaf as a whole, of what real use is your College course? The members of the faculty at Gallaudet are sometimes said to be a group of good sign-makers. At any rate, they have had the advantage of studying under such men as Dr. Gallaudet, Dr. Fay, Dr. Peet, and others. With such examples and such teachers before you, you have a wonderful opportunity to learn the sign-language correctly. When you do not realize the importance of this, but carelessly go on making your own slangy signs, or making the wrong signs, you are giving the opponents of the language another chance to criticize it. A great step in advance was made at the last play given by the Jollity Club—not a single slang sign was used. It is only when the sign-language becomes what it was intended to be—dignified, expressive, and beautiful—that its opponents will be silenced. How soon that time will arrive depends on each one of us as individuals.

I plead with you all, not for more signs, or for signs instead of speech, but for better signs, in addition to better speech!